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THE MESSAGE OF RUSSIA, OR THE REAL MOUJIK

By HILDEGARDE WANOUS

THE mighty land through which the Volga and the Dnieper slowly wind their way to the sea has very seldom been thought of in terms of civilization. Always Russia comes to us as the ultimate symbol of all that is dark and terrible. Across the unbridged gulf that yawns between the average Anglo-American and the Slav there appears only the huge, hulking figure of a bear wading through perpetual snows to the menacing clank of exiles' chains. In fancy we have seen her lonely desolate marshes, her dreary steppes, her vast, monotonous plains. We remember miles of unbroken snowdrifts rising like frozen billows before the bleak expanse before us. We have stood in sunless prison vaults where myriads of liberty-proclaiming voices have been hushed. We have penetrated the gloomy wastes of Siberia where great men and brilliant women are languishing slowly away in life-long exile. The history of Russia is one of shadows; her past in darkness bred. Exile and death, desolation and cold, untold agonies borne and passionate yearnings unfulfilled—these are the terms which leap into our consciousness whenever the name of Russia is spoken.

That the term has taken on a sinister meaning is not to be wondered at or deemed in the least singular. The Muscovite Empire stands before the world—a dark, menacing, torpid giant upon whose frozen heart have streamed in vain the hot tears of uncouth men and women for weary generations!

And yet, for all that, we have never known the real Russia—the Russia of the peasant, the Volga gangster and the *moujik* plowman—the Russia that has a message of redemption for a stricken humanity. This that we have known and condemned is merely the Russia of Petrograd which has grafted itself upon the Russia of the peasant like a malignant growth upon the flesh of a healthy body. A great difference exists between these two—the one sullen, decadent, suspicious; the other full of humility and a deep-abiding passion for the grand truths of life; the one emitting spiritual and moral poisons, the other holding in her great, untutored heart all those naïve virtues without which the nations of the earth are reeling like drunken men to-day.

Brotherhood, founded on the democracy of the heart, the instinct for peace, truth and humility are what a world imperiled needs; and a real, enduring brotherhood this world has always lacked, else men would not now be scattered before the cannon's breath like winter's withered leaves. Today all over the world, from the nations that are scourged with war and from the nations that have not yet been touched with blood and famine arises a cry for the healing balm of truth. Truths that heal usually proceed not from the brain but from the heart, not from the high but from the low. In the days preceding the Grand Achievement, Christ sought the heavy-laden and the despised in preference to the learned and the great. He gathered wisdom not from the magistrates of law or the Doctors of Divinity, but from those who were lowly enough to till the soil, keep the vineyards and cast their nets into the sea. The palace, the syna-

gogue and the courtroom grew insignificant before the rude huts of Nazareth, because new things, new creeds and new theories are as nothing when compared to the great passion play that goes on daily within the humble hearts of the poor. There whence the Savior of mankind derived infinite wisdom and unfaltering strength must nations seek enlightenment and healing grace to-day. We must turn to the lowly ones of earth for light. Among the lowly there is none so lowly as the Russian peasant, and to him must we look for the great but simple qualities that will make the accomplishment of universal brotherhood a reality.

More than the peasant of any other country the Russian peasant is the naïve child of nature. He is farthest away from culture; while lacking the graces of civilization, he is also unspoiled by its attendant vices. He is brave, faithful, loyal—a man of the soil, possessing a spirit of good-hearted patience, permeated through and through with an infinite hunger for peace and democracy. Being a Slav he is by nature the least warlike among the Indo-European people, preferring to remain close to the ground and turn the fields with his plowshare instead of brandishing a dripping sword. The passion for war and the glories of war have never cast their blight upon his nature, but the instinct for peace has early entered his heart. All through the ages this unwarlike trait has been among the chief qualities of the Russian character. Far back in the twilight of history, while the Goths and the Vandals were crossing swords with the Greeks and the Latins, the Russian Slav journeyed to the hardy Scandinavian to clasp hands in brotherly friendship. This instinct for peace has been transmitted from generation to generation, this yearning for friendship has been kindled in every Russian soul. It is the root-characteristic of his democratic heart. He cannot escape this longing for brotherhood. He was born with the passion in his blood. It is an all-embracing desire, a hunger bred in the bone, an instinct grander, fuller and more unerring than logic. It is this yearning for peace and friendship that has etched upon every Russian heart the precept—"God is my father and all men my brethren."

You who believe that the Russian peasantry is a horde of savages, you who believe that Russia has no traits that can redeem, I ask you only to cross the Russian confines and see for yourself the beautiful, unconscious democracy blossoming everywhere underneath those coldly smiling skies. You need be there but a little while to find that somehow you have emerged from the coldness and the harshness of the world and entered an atmosphere of love and peace. You will find yourselves among men and women who are permeated with the spirit of real brotherhood, uncouth and graceless though they be. You hear a servant address his master as "my dove" and a mistress address her maid as "my beloved." Even strangers will greet you as a "brother." Here and there you will see weary laborers still pursuing some menial task with a verve and an energy that are remarkable. Bare-armed and bare-chested to the sharp north wind, they labor on. Some are shoveling off the snow

from the sidewalks, some are cleaning the streets, others are flitting past you with huge bundles on their backs. Their eyes are dull, their features uncomely, their movements awkward and ungainly. Yet, somehow, you like them! There is something about those weary faces that reminds you of the beatitudes; something in those lacerated hearts that you know the world does not possess, but which would be good for the world to possess.

What is there about these children of cold and hardship so warm that it has already thawed out your Western hearts? What is it indeed but the mysterious essence of brotherhood found in every face, however furrowed, found in every act, however graceless? It is the native democracy of Russia, the inborn sympathy that is not a veneer but full of that genuineness which makes every one rejoice at the happiness of every other person or mourn with him in his distress!

Coupled with the instinct for peace and democracy is the constant, almost painful craving for truth. The Russian peasant is a fore-doomed truth-seeker, always seeking the light and healing of truth. Peter the Great, in whom were incarnated the millions of Russians who preceded him and out of whom millions more have gone forth to people the earth, early made pilgrimages to Prussia, Holland and England to learn from his more enlightened brethren lessons of truth, order and justice. Russia is presenting this inborn yearning for truth to-day through her literature, her art, her music—through everything in fact that has been born within her giant soul. We have seen it lighting up the pages of Gorky, Turgeniev, Tolstoy and Dostoiefsky. We have seen it chiseled in the marble works of Aronson. We have heard it sobbing in the melancholy strains of Tchaikowsky. And this that we have seen and heard and felt is not the expression of one man only or a group of men, but rather the voiceless, inarticulate soul of the Russian peasantry, touched into expression by the hands of genius.

Yet another quality besides the desire for peace and truth is woven into the warp and woof of the Russian character, and that is humility. All through the ages the Russian peasant has been a man of sorrow. The iron of suffering has entered so deeply into his heart that his idea of humility runs into an all-absorbing passion. It has always been so. The snows of Russia are red with the blood of her peasants, their bones a monument to their trusting faith. It is not so many years ago—a dozen perhaps—that a crowd of peasants journeyed in person to the palace of the Tsar, bearing with them a monster petition for redress. Legions of them gathered together and from the ends of Russia they came, not in the spirit of arrogant dissatisfaction, not in the spirit of insolent complaint, but because the suffering that

was bowing them down to the earth had become unendurable. From childhood they looked upon Nicholas as a sympathetic father—kindly, beneficent, all-forbearing. At last they arrived, tired, hungry, frost-bitten and travel-stained, but the "Little Father" was not there to meet them—only Cossacks and machine-guns. There is little need to pursue the picture further. The world has witnessed so many scenes of Russian suffering that it hardly realizes against what background of humility the never-ceasing drama moves. Perhaps this one arrested our passing attention because it was on a Sabbath morning that the royal snows around the palace of the Tsar became red-dappled.

You may see this same ideal of humility pulsating through the heart of Tolstoy, who represents not one man only but all the millions of Russians put together. Turning his back upon the luxury and ease that he was born to, he stood before the world in peasant's garb and reiterated over and over again the words: "Blessed are the meek, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

An instinct for peace, for brotherhood, for truth, permeated through and through with democracy, resignation, tolerance and humility—these are the qualities of the men who are the backbone of Russia. Age-long serfdom has not made them brutish. Foreign and domestic oppression has not made them bitter. The conviction of able thinkers that Russia has an immense civilization to perform, that the true, democratic ideal cannot take root without her peculiar contributions is based primarily upon this faith in the Russian peasant. Walling the American scholar is the exponent of this idea. Tolstoy the Russian seer wedded himself to this ideal. His life was spent in teaching the world that the ideal of loving service and labor, the ideal of kindness, democracy and brotherhood is but the abstract term for the Russian peasant. Because he made himself one of the people he knew and understood them. The consciousness that God is the father and all men brethren has ever been a freely flowing fountain, toward the life-giving waters of which every Russian has stooped to drink.

Not only individuals have this faith in Russia, but whole peoples and classes as well. Poles, Jews, liberals and exiles have rallied round her because through all these dead, dumb years of suffering their faith in the Russian peasant has remained undimmed. They are unafraid because they know the qualities of Russia that are unknown to the world: the infinite hunger for peace, the infinite hunger for truth, the infinite hunger for brotherhood. Perhaps some day the whole world will discover the giant possibilities of her dormant heart, and it will be good to live in the day of that discovery.

Hildegard Wanous

